NCPV HOTLINE

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Solar car preparing for Heartland Park

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The car can reach speeds of 75 mph.

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Brett Randall is too tall to drive the solar car he helped to assemble.

Randall, a member of the Kansas State University Solar Car Racing Team, has driven Apollo only once because of his size. The driver should be less than 5 feet 8 inches tall, and any weight more than 176 pounds decreases the car's speed.

"I wish I could be a driver because I know I would be really good," he said.

Apollo was on display Monday at the south steps of the Statehouse to educate the public about the use of alternative-fuel vehicles. The event, which was hosted by the Kansas Corporation Commission, showcased two vehicles that will compete at Heartland Park Topeka this weekend.

The solar vehicle relied on batteries on the drive from Manhattan, as the the overcast skies did little to bring energy to the car.

The vehicle, which can reach speeds of 75 mph, is layered with 704 solar cells on the surface. It sits 15 inches from the ground and weighs 1,000 pounds.

Apollo will compete next year in the American Solar Challenge, where it will be driven from Chicago to Los Angeles along Route 66.

Its rectangular white body is built with required turn signals and brake lights, but has no headlights. The only ventilation for the driver is a small opening in the tinted canopy that is removed to enter the vehicle. A rag also is placed near the windshield to remove condensation in the canopy.

A local high school also showcased its vehicle, which runs on electricity.

David Sislo, a Topeka High School metals and computer-aided drafting teacher, started the school's program about two years ago. He said the vehicle's construction provides students a practical application to use in life.

"It is real hands-on," he said. "The angle means something to them."

The school participates in the electro-rally event, where high school teams compete with cars from other schools. The Topeka High team recently placed sixth in the state out of about 40 high schools.

Sislo said almost 70 students helped build the car, which can reach speeds of 33 mph. Construction began in September and finished in March.

"The vast majority of life you have to fix something," he said. "This expands their knowledge base."

The KCC also provided a grant for the K-State solar vehicle. The university will be the home team at the Heartland Park Topeka event.

Jim Ploger, energy manager at the KCC, said the programs educate students about alternative-fuel vehicles and creates awareness for the public. He said students also develop a greater interest in technology.

"We are unlikely to be driving pure solar-energy cars, but there is technology picked up for the kids involved in this," he said. "It gets kids interested in technology."

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